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SUBJECT: BAHRAIN RENEWS TIES WITH ICRC

REF: MANAMA 283

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Bahrain has renewed ties with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as part of its work to address recommendations from the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review. Both the ICRC and Bahrain's Red Crescent have expressed hope that this step will lead to ICRC inspections of Bahrain's prisons. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Nizar Al Baharna has led Bahrain's efforts to address many of the recommendations made during the April, 2008, UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva of Bahrain's human rights record. In November, 2008, Baharna's team held a seminar to share UPR best practices, and the following month launched a web-based database, www.uprbahrain.com, to track human rights developments in the country.

¶3. (SBU) On June 3, Baharna opened a two-day training seminar that brought ICRC officials to Bahrain to discuss appropriate detention and prison conditions. During a break, Baharna told poloff that his UPR team would soon publish a brochure listing all of the GOB's human rights-related activities between June 8, 2008, and June 8, 2009.

¶4. (C) Guilhem Ravier, head of the ICRC's Geneva-based protection division for the Middle East, told poloff that ICRC hopes this conference will reinvigorate the relationship between the ICRC and Bahrain - a relationship that has been dormant since 2001, when King Hamad released all of Bahrain's political prisoners with a general amnesty. Makram Soua, from ICRC's Kuwait office, told poloff that he believes the conference will be the first step towards ICRC inspections of Bahrain's detention facilities. Bahrain's Red Crescent society, headed by Shura Council member Sadeq Al Shihabi, has been instrumental in coordinating between ICRC and the GOB. Al Shihabi told poloff in April that he anticipates the ICRC will eventually inspect Bahrain's prisons, but only after prison guards and managers receive ICRC training.

¶5. (C) Comment: The ICRC regularly inspected Bahraini prisons, at the GOB's invitation, from 1996 through 2001. After the 2001 amnesty, it appears the GOB felt its human rights credentials had been established, and let the relationship with ICRC lapse. With the past year's temporary spike in sectarian tensions, Bahrain's human rights record again came under international scrutiny, which likely explains the renewed engagement with ICRC. Since 2001, the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) has been the only outside organization inspecting Bahrain's prisons. BHRS inspected the men's prison in December 2005, and in May of this year, authorities permitted BHRS to inspect the women's prison and interview a number of inmates for the first time (reftel). It is possible that the most recent BHRS inspection was a dress rehearsal for anticipated cooperation with the ICRC.

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